

Tar Heel of the Year

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The Goodnights: Tar Heels of the Year

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TAR HEELS OF THE YEAR

1997: Hugh McColl

CEO of NationsBank

1998: John Hope Franklin

historian

1999: Franklin Graham

missionary

2000: Larry Wheeler

director of the N.C. Museum of Art

2001: Molly Broad

UNC system president

2002: Kay Yow

N.C. State women's basketball coach

2003: Jim Goodmon

CEO of Capitol Broadcasting

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2004: Howard Manning Jr.

Wake County Superior Court Judge

2005: Martin Eakes

CEO of Self-Help Credit Union

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Jim has become accustomed to being the most powerful man in the room. Entreaties for business loans, offers of multimillion-dollar land deals or art purchases, pitches for new products leave him unruffled. He makes decisions quickly, answering many e-mail messages with one of two words: "OK" or "No."

"He's very self-confident," said Wheeler, the museum director, who has known the couple nearly 10 years. "He has a right to be: Look all around him and you see his kingdom."

David Miner, a former state legislator from Cary, remembers a Republican fundraiser in the fall of 2002. He and Jim Goodnight were among about a dozen attendees invited to a private meeting with Dick Cheney.

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The Iraq war had not begun, and Cheney was explaining why the United States had little choice but to invade. Everyone was nodding politely.

"Cheney is sitting there, the vice president of the United States, and he's making his case, and Dr. Goodnight interrupted him, and he said, 'How do you know these things?' " Miner said. "There was a silence in the room because everybody was stunned."

Influence spreads

For years, the Goodnights stayed ensconced within the private world of SAS.

Jim devoted virtually all his time to managing the business, and Ann forged her own role. She created a full-time job for herself overseeing the company's philanthropy, and her critical eye has judged virtually every piece of art on campus.

But, inevitably, their influence began to extend outside the company's gates.

Looking to invest company profits, Jim Goodnight teamed with developers Tim Smith and Julian "Bubba" Rawl. Goodnight was the key investor in Preston, the golf course community that has come to define Cary's aspirations. He and Sall are still the owners of Prestonwood Country Club, where he spends many weekends on its three 18-hole courses.

SAS money has backed every project Smith and Rawl have developed -- thousands of homes and shopping centers in Wake County and beyond.

The Goodnights took an even bigger step outside the business world in 1997 when they opened Cary Academy, a private school where every student has a laptop and a Web page.

At the time, they were dissatisfied with their son James' education. They said his teachers at Martin Middle School had classes so large they hardly knew students' names and struggled to hold students' attention with outdated materials.

They say they built Cary Academy as a model, intended to prove to public educators that technology in schools works. Today, Cary Academy's 700 students pay an average of \$16,000 each to attend classes in a cluster of neoclassical buildings. Encouraged by their success, the Goodnights didn't stop at building a school.

In 2003, they decided it was time to get rid of the ugly abandoned youth prison obstructing the art museum's park expansion. The Goodnights wrote a check from SAS for \$1 million, and it disappeared.

About the same time, Ann decided that the Triangle needed a hotel to impress visitors and lure business. In January, a hotel and spa with aspirations for a four- or five-star rating will open at the edge of the SAS campus.

Ann has chosen everything about the looks of the six-story hotel, including earth-tone uniforms, original art and wetlands built outside. She flew to a Dallas quarry to pick out a specific shade of limestone for flooring that would shimmer in the dark.

While she is often warm and always polite, she can cast an imposing look of displeasure -- as her hotel managers and others have learned.

Art benefactors

Ann's taste isn't just furnishing hotel rooms. In the past decade, it has started shaping the state's art collection.

The Goodnights' interest in collecting started with Jim's desire to cover office walls. In 1998, Wheeler persuaded Ann to join the art museum foundation's board. Within two years, she was chosen president of the board and ran it in a hands-on way for the next three years.

By the time she rotated off the board in 2005, in addition to removing the prison, the Goodnights had helped pay for a conference on the park expansion, hosted a fundraiser and, through SAS, donated \$1 million to establish a gallery. In 2007, they will start raising millions for a museum endowment and have promised to contribute an undetermined

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amount to that campaign.

Wheeler also struck an arrangement with the couple: They would buy paintings the museum could never afford, with the understanding that someday they would be donated. So far they have bought about a dozen, including a Monet and a Wyeth.

That is why, on a sunny afternoon in December, curator John Coffey is knocking at the Goodnights' front door.

He helps the Goodnights select paintings, choosing them to fit rooms in their 7,500-square-foot lakeside house. Modeled after a plantation home, the house is ornate but not opulent with oak paneling, antique armoires, brass fixtures and crystal lamps.

Coffey arrives with bags of art books and photographs, and they sit knee-to-knee on a red couch.

"I just thought maybe in the dining room," Coffey says, holding up a negative of a portrait. He says portraits would complement their landscapes and still lifes.

Ann is noncommittal. She would be interested in paintings with children, or faces with character or women painted softly and elegantly.

"OK, I'll make a note of that," he says.

"I enjoy seeing these in museums," she says. "I'm just not sure I'd want to see them every day."

Ann says she has learned most of what she knows from Coffey -- and is still learning. A few years ago, she passed over a painting by renowned American landscape artist John Sloan. Since then its value has at least doubled.

"It slipped right through the fingers," Ann says, laughing. "You'll just have to keep working on me, John."

Into the public arena

The Goodnights' art collecting, like most of their work, has happened within their own world, according to their rules. But this year, they took an unusual step: They ventured into the fray over public school funding.

A \$970 million bond issue -- enough to build 17 schools, renovate 13 others and repair another 100 -- was on the table in Wake County. School leaders said the money was desperately needed to keep up with surging student enrollment. But a contingent of residents, angry with the board's spending choices and its plan to start mandatory year-round schools, were vowing to defeat it.

In the spring, Ann got word that bond supporters wanted her to help lead the campaign, in part because she had been the co-chairwoman of a much less contentious bond campaign in 2003. "When I received that call, I didn't hesitate," Ann said.

Her move onto the center stage of politics surprised her daughter Leah.

"This past year, she's pushed herself into areas where she's not comfortable," Leah said. "I think, like me, she's a shy person, but she's putting herself out there to help the cause."

Ann took on the role of campaign leader with gusto, giving newspaper interviews, debating the bond proposal on the radio, hosting rallies -- even persuading Jim to speak at one and writing his speech.

But she inflamed the anti-bonds side with an off-the-cuff remark to an N&O reporter. Reacting to a poll indicating that voters would reject the bonds, Ann said she was frustrated that "people don't get it."

The comment opened the door for critics. Newspaper letter writers, talk radio callers and bloggers all took shots, some portraying her as a "billionairess" who couldn't speak for the working class. Others claimed the Goodnights were pro-growth because they own so much real estate and would benefit if fast growth continued.

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Ann acknowledges it was the first time she had received such intense public criticism. But she said it was worth it.

She turns uncharacteristically eloquent when she says she was inspired by those who pushed for the then-unpopular merger of the city and county school systems 30 years ago. "We have been warmed by a fire that others made," she says. "And it was up to us to keep that fire burning."

Bill Atkinson, president of WakeMed and co-chairman of the bonds campaign, said the public potshots never seemed to discourage her.

"She is passionate about the things she believes in," Atkinson said. "She is very giving of her time and energy. There's no way to understand the resources she has at her fingertips by her demeanor -- she is a humble, caring, giving person."

The Goodnights' role in the campaign raised their profile and brought more of the kind of fame that makes them uncomfortable.

Ann says she cringed when her name was called over a loudspeaker at a North Hills store where she was Christmas shopping earlier this month. But she left with her spirits bolstered because, she said, several people walked up and thanked her for her work on the bond campaign.

Jim has a harder time getting used to the attention. He says he relishes trips out of town, where no one knows him.

Reluctant socialites

One evening earlier this month, the Goodnights were mingling in the lobby of the N.C. Museum of Art. It was the dinner event of the season for the museum's largest donors. The clink of cocktail glasses and the strains of a harp filled the air.

Jim had donned a freshly pressed tuxedo and was laughing conspiratorially with other men. Ann, dressed in a tasteful tailored suit, was accepting hugs from friends.

But before long, Jim slumped on a bench and confided, "I hate these things."

After a few minutes, he rejoined the crowd. Soon, they were herded toward the auditorium to hear about the museum's new fundraising campaign. On their way to their folding chairs, a photographer stopped the Goodnights.

They gamely circled their arms around each other and smiled brightly as the camera flashed.

(Staff researcher Lamara Williams-Hackett contributed to this report.)

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